

How K-Pop Thai Idols Affect Koreans' Public Perception of Thai People and Multicultural Families: The Case of BLACKPINK's Lisa

Kamon Butsaban¹

¹ Department of Eastern Languages, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Corresponding Author:

Kamon Butsaban

Korean Section, Department of Eastern Languages,
Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand
E-mail: kamon1932@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This study explores what impact Thai K-pop idols have had on the Korean public's perception of Thai people. The purpose of this study is to analyze the general image of Thai people held by Koreans. To do so, it examined how Koreans' biased image of Thai people, shaped by the reports of Korean media and looked into one specific incident surrounding BLACKPINK Lisa to analyze the news reports on this incident and the reactions and opinions of Koreans expressed online.

Koreans group foreign workers as Southeast Asians and see them as criminals who cause social problems. And Koreans have a biased perception that multicultural families are mostly formed through the marriage between a Korean man and a Southeast Asian woman and think that these families are social minority groups that need to be treated with sympathy. However, the influence of Thai idols on the media such as Lisa on the perceptions of the Korean public is found to be positive. Even when the issue of racial discrimination was raised surrounding Lisa, many netizens criticized and self-reflected on the racial discrimination in Korea.

Keywords: K-pop, BLACKPINK Lisa, Thai people, image, Korean Public

INTRODUCTION

The Korean wave, or Hallyu, has been raising a global frenzy beyond Asia headed by the popularity of K-pop since the late 2000s. K-pop has been noted by multiple studies as a transnational phenomenon which “transcends all things including culture, social environment, and race” as a musical genre that is not limited to the boundaries of Korea but has been growing into a globally-exchanged K-culture (Lee, 2013). K-pop is a collective term for all Korean popular music but has its focus more on Korea’s mainstream popular music consisting of musical idol groups (Hwang et al., 2012: 6). Idol groups began to be systematically produced in Korea from the mid-1990s by SM Entertainment’s Lee Soo-man, and since then, the methods of producing idol groups have changed and developed over time. The so-called “first-generation idols” of the Korean Wave, who appeared in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, targeted and became popular among Korea’s teenagers and young adults in their 20s. Their songs were mainly translated into Chinese and Japanese to enter the East Asia market. Afterward, in accordance with the transnational nature of K-pop, the second-generation Korean Wave idols were produced with the intention of globalization in all aspects of artist planning, music production, publicity, and activities, which consequently transformed their music into a transnational genre in form and content (Shim, 2013: 14). Following this trend, entertainment agencies began to add non-Korean members to the idol groups as a localization strategy for the international market. The prominent characteristic or trend of the K-pop idol industry’s globalization strategy today can be summarized as “multicultural” and “multinational.” That is, the agencies seek to localize the idol groups by adding members from targeted global markets to add appeal based on those members’ local popularity and cultural intimacy. There have been many successful multinational K-pop idol groups created through this globalization and localization strategy.

In the early 2000s, a large number of Chinese members were added to K-pop idol groups with the Chinese and Japanese markets in mind. In 2005, SM Entertainment produced its global idol group Super Junior, whose Chinese member Han Geng stood at the frontline when the group made its entry into the Chinese market. Two of the four members of the female idol group F(x), which debuted in 2009, are Chinese (Victoria, Ember). EXO-M debuted in 2012 with the Chinese market in mind from the beginning, and four out of its six members are Chinese (Ray, Tao, Ruhan, and Chris). These members are actively working in both Korea and China and contributed greatly to the success of K-pop in China. In 2010, JYP Entertainment debuted Miss-A, composed of two Korean members and two Chinese members (Jia and Faye), and in 2015, TWICE, a multinational idol group composed of four foreign members (three Japanese and one Chinese) and five Korean members. TWICE’s success and popularity in Japan have been attributed to the Japanese members of the group, Sana, Mina, and Momo.

As K-pop gained popularity beyond China and Japan, spreading to Southeast Asia market and meeting a huge success, Southeast Asian members began to appear in the idol groups. A representative case is Nichkhun, a member of 2PM who made their debut through JYP Entertainment in 2008. Nichkhun is the very first Southeast Asian K-pop idol group member and this fact brought a freshness and surprise to the Korean public just by being a ‘Thai’

national. Nichkhun's success as an idol member meant more than his becoming a national star in Korea and Thailand. He contributed greatly to changing the perception and image of Thai people held by the Korean public. Nichkhun was called the 'Prince of Thailand' by Koreans and became the person that comes to the minds of Korean people when they think of Thailand and Thai people. Since Nichkhun, the number of Thai idols who are dreaming to become the second Nichkhun of the K-pop industry started to increase noticeably, among these idol group members, GOT7's BamBam and BLACKPINK's Lisa became center figures of the K-pop fervor. BLACKPINK's Lisa is a member of the girl group BLACKPINK produced by YG Entertainment which made its debut in 2016 and is the first non-Korean idol group member and Thai member ever to be produced by YG Entertainment. As such, Lisa received significant attention from the media and the Korean public from the very early days after BLACKPINK's debut.

How these multinational, non-Korean idols, whose number has increased significantly in the K-pop industry, have influenced the Korean public is an important issue. Many Korean studies over the years have mostly analyzed the effect of K-pop on foreigners overseas through its localization strategy, that is, how K-pop influences its audience and its outcomes. There has been little research conducted so far on how the globalization of K-pop has affected the Korean public. For instance, Nichkhun came as a fresh surprise to Koreans because he was the first K-pop idol coming from a developing country and because of his Thai nationality - this can be seen from the fact that the keywords "Thai" and "Thailand" always appear as related search words when performing an internet search on Nichkhun. The media also called Nichkhun the "Prince of Thailand" and created Nichkhun's image as such in the Korean public's minds. In this way, Nichkhun became a representative image of Thailand to the Korean public and showed that Thai people could also take the center stage of the Korean Wave and become the subject of admiration. Internet searches on BLACKPINK's Lisa also bring out "Thailand" as related search words, reflecting how her nationality continues to be central to her image. BLACKPINK is popular in the Southeast Asian market, with Lisa as the key figure to bring such attraction. Accordingly, Korean companies have used BLACKPINK for advertising their products as a strategy to expand their market share in Southeast Asia. For instance, Samsung used BLACKPINK as the PR model for Galaxy A.¹

Lisa has become one of the so-called "fashion people" in Korea, giving birth to the term "Lisa Look" that refers to her hairstyle, fashion, and make-up style, which are admired by many Koreans. YouTube, launched in 2005, expanded K-pop fandom globally through its services for searching and viewing videos, commenting on contents, and subscribing to channels that allow users to share information and opinions and transform personal interests and hobbies into a topic shared by many. (Song & Jang, 2013: 165). Lisa has built a positive image which appeals to many fandoms and the general public and she has the highest number of followers on Instagram among Korean entertainers. However, the prejudice and negative

¹ Paek, Yoo-Jin. (2019, April 11). Re: Galaxy A' uses BLACKPINK as model..... Will Samsung Electronics become No. 1 again in Thailand?. Retrieved from Bridge Economy, <http://www.viva100.com/main/view.php?key=20190411010004121>

images Koreans have toward foreigners remain as an unsolved issue. On the article about Lisa at the 2019 Golden Disk Awards Red Carpet posted on Nate, one of Korea's web portal, a netizen made a comment with a racist nuance that said, "She looks like a beautiful Russian elf when all made-up, with dark hair and no make-up, she's just a Thai woman..." This comment was translated and posted on a Thai web community, and Southeast Asian fans criticized Koreans for their racism and posted a video on racial discrimination that recorded more than 100,000 views.²

This is not the first time the racial discrimination in Korea has raised controversy. From the end of the 1980s, Korea rapidly transformed into a multicultural society with the increase in foreign workers and immigrants through international marriages. Korea has long taken pride for being a homogenous nation and having a homogenous culture. So, the term "multiculturalism" was introduced for the first time in Korea as the influx of foreigners, who brought their diverse cultures with them in the 1990s. The rapid change that took place in a short period of time created an aversive response among Koreans, leading to the frequent expression of hatred or discriminatory attitude toward foreigners. As most of the foreign workers and marriage immigrants are originated from Southeast Asian countries, the racism in Korea has taken the form of a 'non-white race discriminating another non-white race,' in other words, Koreans, who are also Asian, discriminating other Asians. Korea's Orientalism distinguishes Korea and Southeast Asia. There is a possibility that the concept of Orientalism can be usefully applied not only to Western and Oriental problems but also to analyze whether one group in the same area dominates other groups and produces discourse (Kim, 2014). Korean's resentment and discrimination against foreigners can be explained through Orientalism and the Advanced Country discourse. The influx of migrants created a chance for Koreans to become the agent of Orientalism, which sits at the core of imperialist discourse (Eom, 2008: 37-45). Orientalism establishes a boundary between 'us' and 'them' and deepens the perception of dichotomy, separating the West and the East and inputting biased perceptions of the East which is categorized as 'the other' (Said, 1979). Following a similar mechanism, Korea's Orientalism separates Korea from Southeast Asia. The concept of Orientalism is useful to understand West-East problem and to analyze how a dominant social group categories produces discourses about another social group as the other (Moon, 2006: 269-277). Korea has never been the agent of imperialism and colonialism; it was only after Korea started to invite foreign workers into the country after achieving rapid economic growth during the 1970s and visibly began to modernize and develop into an advanced country become more visible Korea transformed from a subject of power to an agent of power. Korea had experienced the transformation from a subject of Orientalism to an agent of Orientalism, which entailed the first-time experience of the pleasure that comes with the power of defining the other (Jun, 2015: 246).

² Kim, Tae-won. (2019, January 18). Re:Koreans are racially discriminating Lisa'... Why fans in Thailand are angry about the racial discrimination of BLACKPINK member Lisa, YouTube videos condemning the situation centering on foreign idol group members raising concern over 'creating negative image of Korea. Retrieved from Sunday Newspaper http://ilyo.co.kr/?ac=article_view&entry_id=322992

In addition, it has been often argued that Koreans' discrimination of foreigners stems from the "Advanced Country" discourse, which discusses the Western-centered and developmental cognitive system that divides the world into 'advanced countries' and 'underdeveloped countries' (Kim & Han, 2013: 35-66). The Advanced Country discourse argues that Koreans' exclusivist attitude toward foreigners is not consistently applied to all foreigners. Instead, Koreans relatively prefer foreigners from developed countries more than those from underdeveloped countries. Korean society expresses great respect toward countries that are considered advanced but while ignoring or looking down upon countries that are considered unadvanced or underdeveloped. In the structure of this discourse, Koreans feel inferior to foreigners from advanced countries and superior to those from developing countries. Consequently, these feelings give birth to racist prejudices against the latter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Korean society is changing, there still remain prejudices and negative images upon Southeast Asians and multicultural families in Korea. However, the greater exposure to foreigners who frequently appear in the mass media has been influencing Koreans to shed some of their negative feelings and prejudices toward foreigners and to form more positive perceptions. In particular, the impact of celebrities on the Korean public can be stronger than that of ordinary people.

A number of existing studies have shown that celebrities of popular culture can enhance the image of a particular country. Lee (2009) argued using soft power theory that popular culture can be a means to enhance a nation's wealth and image and that the consumption of the Korean Wave creates a specific image and perception of Korea which can become important in developing Korea's soft power. Based on the "heroes and celebrities strategy," which is one of the most successful soft power strategies, he explains that the strong influence celebrities have on the public:

Koreans are being recreated as charming, warm, and advanced. They encounter less discrimination, and many times have easier chances penetrating into the societies of their residence. Here what stands out the most is the role of Korean stars and celebrities. They have become the symbol of Korea in the regions where the Korean wave is popular, and the words and deeds that those stars make indeed have a huge impact upon the minds of many of Korean wave fans. Therefore, Korean wave stars have become very important soft resources of Korea, and are expected to play a more active, though subtle, political roles representing Korea's as well as regional and universal interests.

Other studies have also reported that favorable feelings toward a Korean Wave star can positively affect the image of Korea as a nation (Hwang & Cho, 2008). The Korean Wave has raised the image and brand value of Korea in its receiving countries, contributing to the positive image of Korea and Koreans (Hwang et al., 2012). Kim & Kim (2005) showed that Korean TV dramas have positively changed the misunderstanding, bias, and negative images about Korea held by the Japanese people. Most of the existing studies have closely investigated the influence of celebrities on the public that looks up to them. However, as mentioned before, previous literature has largely focused on the perception of Korea among the overseas audience in countries that have been hit by the Korean Wave and the positive effects of multinational K-pop idols on the Korean Wave.

In contrast, the study by Kim (2017) analyzed how a Thai idol in Korea's popular culture has affected the image of Thai people held by Koreans. Eunjeong Kim's study examined how the first Thai K-pop idol Nichkhun influenced the perception and prejudice Koreans have on Thai people by analyzing the comments and opinions on Nichkhun. The study investigates whether Nichkhun changed Koreans' biased image of Thai people and contributed to enhancing the image of Thailand and Thai people. And it discusses the potential Thai K-pop idols may have as a soft power resource to create a 'Thailand's soft power in Korea. The study concludes that although Thai idols have promoted a good image of Thailand and brought about a positive curiosity and interest in Thailand among Koreans, negative connotations still follow when Koreans talk about Thai people in general, revealing two completely divisible groups of Thai people in the perception of Korean society.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes the opinions that are formed and shared among the mass public using media analysis method to study the public perception based on existing research. Through the media, people receive information about the various events that occur in society and indirectly experience them. When the media conveys a message about multiculturalism, the audience subconsciously accepts it as a fact and creates a public sphere that gives birth to the discourse on multiculturalism (Jang, 2013: 159). Park et al. (2008) noted the educational role of the media, highlighting how the media can provide information on the rights of the minorities and create the awareness and image of multiculturalism by speaking on their behalf. The media's ability to create images and concepts is an old rhetoric of the media's functions and roles. In other words, setting agendas about the various problems and issues in society, and defining and framing these problems and issues are among the functions of the media. Linking these functions to the multicultural discourse, the media's representation of migrants will lead to discourses about them, which, in turn, can form in a specific viewpoint and affect the public's perception of multiculturalism positively or negatively. Whether the media can actually bring a change in people's attitudes is still under dispute, but the impact of the media on public perception has been supported by many studies. The media unilaterally deliver reports on events based on facts, and the public may show favorable or opposing responses to these reports.

Therefore, this study analyzes how the articles on multiculturalism and Thai people transmitted through the Korean media include the Korean public's perceptions and examine the multicultural discourse generated in this process. As the means to do so, this study investigates how BLACKPINK's Thai member, Lisa, has affected Koreans' perception of Thai people and compare the similarities and differences between the images of Thai people and those of BLACKPINK Lisa held by Koreans to measure the distance between these images. Ultimately, this study attempts to discuss whether Thai K-pop idols can change and enhance the image of Thai people held by Koreans.

K-POP AND MULTICULTURALISM

As multiculturalism became a global trend, Korea also started to transform into a multicultural society since the 2000s. A multicultural family is a term that refers to a family living in Korea formed by a marriage between Korean and foreign husband or wife. In Korea, however, multicultural families are often conceptualized as a family with a non-Korean parent who is either African or Southeast Asian. This misconception may have resulted from the fact that the majority of the international marriages between Koreans and non-Koreans are between a Korean husband and a foreign wife, mostly from Southeast Asian countries. Media program also shows Korea's multicultural families which are formed between a Korean man and Southeast Asia women. Table 1 shows the number and ratio of multicultural marriages from 2015 to 2017 in Korea, where it can be seen that the number of multicultural families is continuing to increase.

Table 2 presents the detailed ratios of international marriage by nationality during the same period. First, in the case of international marriages between a Korean woman and a foreign man, the husband's nationalities were China, the United States, Vietnam, Canada, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Taiwan, France, and Germany, in the order of higher ratio. On the other hand, in the cases where a Korean man married a foreign woman, the ratios of the wives' nationalities were clearly different. Most of the wives came from Asian countries, apart from the United States, specifically, from Vietnam, China, Thailand, Philippines, Japan, Cambodia, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia, in the order of higher ratio. It can be seen that, of these women, 40% are from Southeast Asia.

Koreans' perception of Southeast Asian people, who are seen as 'the other,' can be categorized into two groups. The first is the foreign workers in 3D industries and criminals. About 70% of the foreigners came to Korea to work and most of them reside in specific areas in Korea (Park & Jung, 2004). These foreign laborers work in the 3D industries, becoming a part of the lower class in Korean society, and the residential areas densely populated by these foreign workers have been facing security problems and increase in crimes committed by foreigners, causing fear and aversion of foreigners among Koreans (Roh & Cho, 2014). Table 3 summarizes the major keywords that appeared most frequently in Korea's media reports on Thai people. In the media reports between 2007 and 2017, the most frequently mentioned words related to 'Thai' or 'Thailand' were those closely related to social crimes such as illegal immigration and illegal employment, foreigner crimes, drug trafficking, habitual gambling, illegal massages, prostitution, and AIDS.

Table 1. The Number and Ratio of Multicultural Marriages by Type (2015-2017)
 (Unit: Marriages, %)

	2015	Ratio	2016	Ratio	2017	Ratio	Year-on-Year	
							Increase	Increase rate
Multicultural	22,462	100	21,709	100	21,917	100	208	1.0
Foreign wife ¹	14,051	62.6	14,255	65.7	14,245	65	-10	-0.1
Foreign husband ²	5,133	22.9	4,207	19.4	4,294	19.6	87	2.1
Naturalized ³	3,278	14.6	3,247	15.0	3,378	15.4	131	4.0

Source. Requoted from the 2017 Trends in Multicultural Population, Statistics Korea, p. 5.

1 Foreign wife: Marriage between Korean man (by birth) + Foreigner woman

2 Foreign husband: Marriage between Foreigner man + Korean woman (by birth)

3 Naturalized: Either man or woman is naturalized or both of them naturalized.

Table 2. The Ratio of International Marriages by Nationality (2015-2017)
(Unit: Marriages, %)

	Husband	2015	2016	2017	Wife	2015	2016	2017
Total	22,462	21,709	21,917		Total	22,462	21,709	21,917
%	100.0	100.0	100.0	%		100.0	100.0	100.0
Korea	66.9	69.9	69.1	Korea		23.3	19.8	20.0
Foreign	33.1	30.1	30.9	Foreign		76.7	80.2	80.0
China	9.7	9.9	10.2	Vietnam		23.1	27.9	27.7
U.S.	7.3	6.4	6.4	China		27.9	26.9	25.0
Vietnam	1.9	2.6	2.7	Thailand		2.5	3.3	4.7
Canada	2.1	1.8	2.0	The Philippines		4.7	4.3	4.3
Japan	3.6	1.8	1.4	Japan		4.6	3.9	3.9
Australia	1.1	0.9	0.9	U.S.		3.0	2.8	2.8
U.K.	0.9	0.9	0.8	Cambodia		2.5	2.4	2.5
Taiwan	0.7	0.6	0.6	Taiwan		1.2	1.2	1.3
France	0.8	0.6	0.6	Uzbekistan		1.0	1.1	1.1
Germany	0.6	0.4	0.4	Mongolia		0.8	0.9	0.9
Other	4.4	4.1	4.7	Other		5.5	5.5	5.8

Source. Requoted from the 2017 Trends in Multicultural Population, Statistics Korea, p. 13.

Cases where nationalities are unknown were excluded.

Naturalized husband/wives were accounted for based on their original nationalities, and foreigners were accounted for based on their nationalities at the time of marriage.

Table 3. Keywords associated with 'Thai/Thailand' in Korea's Media Reports

Korean Media (19 media agencies)	Years	Major Keywords
Yonhap News	2007-2017 (10 years)	
Newsis		
Maeil Business News		1) Illegal immigrants / illegal employment
The Dong-A Ilbo		2) Crimes by foreigners
JoongAng Daily		3) Drug trafficking
The Kukmin Daily		4) Habitual gambling
The Kyunghyang Shinmun		5) Illegal massages
Money Today		6) Sex trade / prostitution
The Herald Business		7) AIDS
Star News		8) Fake passport
Financial News		9) Fake marriage
No-cut News		10) Transgender
Kuki News		11) Murder
Segye Ilbo		12) Gangs
Kangwon Ilbo		13) Sexual harassment / sexual assault
Simin Ilbo		14) Terrorism
The Asia Economy Daily		15) Knife attack, arson, murder of work colleague
Kyeongin Ilbo		
Joongboo Ilbo		

Source. Requoted from Eunjeong Kim (2017) p. 30-31

Korea's public reaction to these media reports have been negative and showed the tendency to criminalize Thai people as a whole. According to the research on media report trends on migrant workers in Korea and their effect on public perception by Im (2012), a large portion of the news on migrant workers published by the Korea's major daily newspapers *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyoreh* and local newspapers *Kyeongin Ilbo* and *Busan Ilbo* are reports that raise problems or make accusations. Also, the overall direction of Korea's media reports on migrant workers highlighted their negative aspects and described them negatively.

On the other hand, Southeast Asian migrants are perceived as an "alienated social class in the Korean society that should be treated with sympathy." *Love in Asia* is a Korean TV problem that has been airing for 10 years from 2005, introduces itself as "A heartwarming project for foreign workers who came to Korea in search of their dreams! A project to connect Korea, Asia, and the world by fostering understanding and the spirit of sharing! This program touches upon the human stories behind multicultural families that build dreams and love beyond borders." Another TV program, *Multicultural Fierce Conflicts between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law (Gobuyeoljeon)*, was on the air since 2013, explaining the concept of the program as, "Two people who feel awkward and hard to breathe when they are in the same room, Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, go on a trip together to the daughter-in-law's home country. This program shows that these two people learn to understand each other and overcome conflict to grow into trusting partners, on their own without the husband and children." Most of the people who are shown on the program are from developing countries and the majority of them are Southeast Asian women.

More than 40,000 articles published in major newspapers appear when "multicultural" is searched on Korea's most popular internet portal, NAVER. In recent years, the major issues related to multiculturalism reported by these articles have been the provision of social welfare services for multicultural families and discrimination against the children of multicultural families. Notably, the most of photos used in the articles on national welfare and education for multicultural families are images of migrant women from South East Asia and their children, a reflection of the significant weight attached to Southeast Asia in relation to international marriages in Korean society and, at the same time, the perception that these people are being discriminated and should be protected and treated with sympathy.

In terms of the K-pop industry, more multinational idols have appeared, but most of them are from the United States, China and Japan, with a growth trend in the number of Thai idols. What these idols have in common is that they are not 'exotic-looking' and fit well amid Koreans, and they have light skin tones. This so-called 'whitewashing' has become a controversial issue in the K-pop industry and has been facing criticism as racial discrimination. Whitewashing is a term usually used to refer to Hollywood's tendency to cast white actors for major roles, but now it is at the heart of the criticism against the racist tendencies of the K-pop industry. Whitewashing in K-pop refers to the over-correction of K-pop idols' skin colors. In the case of Thai idols, Nichkhun, BamBam, Son, Ten, and Lisa all have appearances that are similar to Koreans and have skin colors that Koreans prefer, thereby implanting an image in the Korean public's mind that is different from how Koreans think of Thai people.

When news articles about Lisa always mention Lisa's nationality and her skin color; many of the articles containing Lisa's photos and advertisements use the expression "Creamy Skin" in their titles. The comment, which was posted on the Korean web community Instiz, raised the issue of racial discrimination against Lisa (January 18, 2019), and received further comments such as "has white skin considering she is Thai," and "doesn't look like she's from Thailand." These comments show that Koreans still have a fixed image of Thai people and the distance between this image and the looks of Thai idols remain as a controversial issue.³

In response to criticism from overseas fans about the whitewashing and racial discrimination in K-pop, Korean fans have refuted that "Koreans have culturally preferred light skin colors from a long time ago." One study surveyed Korean fans using samples of 991 foreigners and found that race and color were major factors of discrimination by Koreans (Jeong et al., 2017; Won, 2012). Koreans are indirectly exposed to 'Thai people' in everyday life through the media. Mostly are Southeast Asian women who appear in *Love in Asia* and *Gobuyeoljeon*, and news reports on the discrimination children of multicultural families face due to their skin colors are now too familiar. Most of the 30,232 news reports on multiculturalism in Korea in the years 2018 and 2019 published in JoongAng, Chosun, and Hankyoreh news agencies are about the support and assistance provided for multicultural families, describing these families as a group that needs to be helped. The images that fill the paper alongside these news reports are images of Southeast Asian women, strengthening the bias of Korean people visually.

The number of multicultural families in Korean society continues to increase and most cases are through the marriage between Korean men and women from Southeast Asian countries. Korean men marrying Thai women have also been increasing steadily every year. Twenty years have passed since Korea began to convert into a multicultural society. However, Koreans strong ideas about pure bloodlines and national homogeneity have exacerbated their exclusive attitudes toward the unfamiliar and prejudice against the minority groups, and the measures to support multicultural families have been prepared and implemented without the recognition of their unique cultures and identities, from the sense of sympathy and as a charitable assistance for the needy. In the case of the foreign migrant workers, despite their contributions to the Korean economy, their involvement in even a small problem can have them deported, considered as targets of ostracization than as legitimate members of society (Yoo, 2010: 85).

³ Retrieved from https://www.instiz.net/name_enter/60030761

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF BLACKPINK'S LISA

To understand Korea's public perception of Lisa, the articles reported in the Korean media from August 2016, when BLACKPINK made their debut, to April 2019 were analyzed by performing an internet search using the keywords "BLACKPINK" and "LISA" on articles published by 364 media agencies including Korea's major daily newspapers, sports and entertainment newspapers, broadcast communications, and internet newspapers. A total of 2,219 articles came up, which were mostly about BLACKPINK's official activities and their styles and appearances. An article published on August 5, 2016 showed the official poster released just before BLACKPINK Lisa's debut and mentioned that Lisa is from Thailand. Among the 23 comments made on this article were the following comments.⁴

"She's not that pretty, I wanna just eat pho with her."

"Looks like she'll eat a lot of pho"

"Don't deal with S(hit)outheast Asia ..."

These comments, however, were not welcomed by other netizens and received criticism for being racist. Two hundred comments were made on another article, published in 2017, titled "Pure and Innocent Beauty in Blond, BLACKPINK Lisa Shakes Men's Hearts with Her Doll-like Looks,"⁵ most of which praised how pretty Lisa was, but among them were quite a few comments that mention how her image is different from that of Thai people that went as follows:

"They say she's Thai, but she doesn't look it... she's just pretty like a Western girl..."

"Thought she was from Europe at first, but she's Thai"

"She's so white, can't believe she's Thai"

"She's half white for sure. Pure Thais can't look like that. Same with Nichkhun."

"For real, she's different from the Thai people that pop to my mind... she's so white and pretty."

"Thought her nose was pretty for a Thai, and sure enough, it's not the same from the photo I saw of her before she debuted"

⁴ Kim, Young-Rok. (2016, August 5). Re: D-3 to Debut' BLACKPINK Lisa, Her Exotic + Chic Look. Retrieved from Sports Chosun <http://sports.chosun.com/news/ntype.htm?id=201608060100051680003467&servicedate=20160805>

⁵ Kim, Young-Rok. (2017, January 7). Re: Pure and Innocent Beauty in Blond, BLACKPINK Lisa Shakes Men's Hearts with Her Doll-like Looks. Retrieved from Sports Chosun, <http://sports.chosun.com/news/ntype.htm?id=201701080100049520003178&servicedate=20170107>

However, since most of the media reports were related to the activities of Lisa as an idol, most of the comments were also positive and full of admiration from a fan's point of view of BLACKPINK. To examine the public perception of Lisa more objectively, the article dealing with the recent controversy surrounding the racism issue concerning Lisa was investigated, and the following comments were found online. First, the netizen comment that sparked the issue of racial discrimination was as follows.

“She looks like a beautiful Russian elf when all made-up, with dark hair and no make-up, she's just a Thai woman...”

The netizens' opinions on this comment can be divided into two types, first, those of fans that take Lisa's side, and second, those that discuss whether or not this comment is racist. Some of the comments by netizens who think this comment is racist are as follows:

“.... Isn't comparing Lisa with a Russian beauty when she has make-up on and saying she's like a Thai girl at the end putting down the Thais without question? I mean, comparing Russian beauties and Thai women is demeaning...”

“It's racist. ... If a Western see a Korean and says she's beautiful, but without make-up says she's a typical Asian, isn't it racist?”

“Russian elf with make-up and Thai without make-up.. isn't this racial discrimination?”

“I'll explain it to you fools out there. She's like a Russian elf with make-up (Russians are pretty) but she's just Thai without make-up (Thai people are as uglier than Russians as before and after putting on make-up). This is demeaning to Thai people.”

The comments that rebut these opinions go as follows.

“How can saying that a Thai person looks like a Thai person be racist? Seems more racist saying that she's like a Russian elf.”

“Isn't the person just saying that she seems pretty but without make-up she just seems like a common Thai person rather than being racist?”

“Telling a Thai person she looks Thai - what's racist about that?”

“Isn't she Thai originally? Why is telling a Thai person she looks like she's from her country racist? Why is everyone making such a fuss?”

“How is calling a Thai person Thai racist? Is she Korean then?”

“Is it racial discrimination to say a Thai person is a Thai person without make-up?”

“Why is calling a Thai person Thai racist”

“What is it wrong to say a Thai person looks like a Thai person without make-up? Do we have to say she looks like she's from some other country? Tbh Lisa is so pretty

that I thought she was half American or something so I was surprised when I learned she was from Thailand, but now that I see her often, I can see she has the Thai feel."

The following facts can be found in the public perceptions in the discussion over whether or not Lisa is Thai. The first is the image of Thai people held by Koreans. Many Koreans expressed that Lisa was Western and didn't know she was Thai, because her skin color is white, showing that the gap between the image of Thai people Koreans have and the image of Lisa led to dispute whether the comment is racist. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Lisa's Thai nationality is still becoming an issue among the Korean public, and that her activities promoting her home country has led Koreans to take more interest in and get to know Thailand. When she appeared on *Knowing Bros*, a TV program broadcasted by JTBC, a Korean cable channel, in August of 2017, Lisa performed a traditional Thai dance, and the public reacted explosively to it, saying "I want to know about Thai dances," "It's charming," "Somebody tells me what the song to the Thai dance is," "I want to see more." There were one or two racist comments, but the majority of the people ignored and criticized those comments, showing that Korean society is undergoing a change. Kim (2017) analyzed the comments made on the article on Nichkhun's debut in 2008 and found that many of the comments were racist, calling Nichkhun a "foreign worker" and "illegal migrant," and that these comments received a lot of likes from other netizens. Ten years have passed since then, and such comments now receive criticism and are not sympathized by the Korean public -- an example of showing how much Korean society has changed.

Another article reported that Lisa was chosen to be the model for a famous foreign brand.⁶ *Dazed Korea* magazine introduced Lisa as a new muse of Celine's 2019 S/S collection by Hedi Slimane. The Koreans reacted explosively to this news. The news was seen as a stepping-stone for Lisa to become a global star from a K-pop star, inciting pride from the people of Thailand and implanting a positive image of Lisa in the eyes of Korean public as a representative idol of Korea. Lisa became the celebrity with the greatest number of SNS followers in Korea, including all other famous celebrities, and when this news report was made,⁷ the reactions of the Korean public were as follows.

⁶ Sung, Jung-Eun. (2019, January 22,). Re: BLACKPINK Lisa, the New Muse of Celine's Hedi Slimane... 'Mysterious, Beautiful'. Retrieved from Maeil Economy Star today <http://star.mk.co.kr/v2/view.php?mc=ST&year=2019&no=45006>

⁷ Lee, Jungsu. (2019, April 15). Re: BLACKPINK Lisa becomes No. 1 in the number of Instagram followers among domestic celebrities. Retrieved from Seoul Newspaper https://www.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20190415500203&wlog_tag3=naver

“Lisa~ A proud Korean-Thai~~ I love you~ I cheer for you”

“Our cute youngest sister with the most overseas fans, the top contributor for expanding the overseas fanbase”

“BLACKPINK’s pride, Lisa, who says pretty things like Thailand is my country, Korea is our country”

“Korean-Thai Gamlalisamanoban Let’s keep walking flowery roads ~”

“Oh Korean-Thai Lalisa hehehe Congratulations, it’s amazing since made your account less than a year ago hehe”

Koreans called Lisa a ‘Korean-Thai’ and praised her as a proud idol who represents both Korea and Thailand. These reactions reflect Korean society’s big change from seeing foreign migrants as ‘the other.’

CONCLUSION

Multiculturalism in Korea rapidly grows over a short period of time compared to multicultural societies in the West. To deal with this fast transition into a multicultural society in keeping with the trend of globalization, Korea has been implementing practical policies to resolve the social confusion and problems arising from multiculturalism. However, most of the policies are assimilation policies without considering individual human rights, cultures, and language. Even if the multinationals assimilate to the Korean culture and language, they are often discriminated due to their different appearances. Also, in spite of national efforts, there still remain exclusive and discriminative attitudes towards foreign migrants including the migrant workers and marriage immigrants. As a part of the multicultural discourse, media has been emphasizing negative images of foreign migrants and indirectly force Korean public to categorize them as criminals and social minorities needed to be treated with sympathy.

The image of idols reported through media and their contents are different from the reports about Thai people in general, and public reactions to the reports also differed greatly. In general, there are two images of Thai or Southeast Asian people reported in the media. They are perceived as a minority group of migrant workers, criminal groups, and people from poor developing countries who need help. Also, due to the image that Korean multicultural families are formed by the marriage between Korean men and women from Southeast Asia, multicultural families became a part of the multicultural discourse as entities that require social protection and support. On the other hand, the media reports about Lisa and Koreans’ perception of her is that she is a pretty idol. Lisa’s Thai nationality has been a major issues since her debut, and the Korean public is surprised by the fact that Lisa “does not look like a Thai person” which is sometimes seen as racial discrimination. However, comments demeaning Lisa’s appearance or nationality are strictly ignored by the general public and even criticized.

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Still, the images of the Thai people that the Korean public held are divided into ordinary multicultural families and K-POP Idols. Nevertheless, unlike the past, incidences where Korean society raises criticism against discrimination and self-reflect on racist remarks can be easily found. At the background of this change is the influence of the Thai members in the K-pop industry such as Nichkhun and Lisa, whom Koreans frequently meet through the media. Over time, through the contributions of these K-pop idols, the images and perceptions of the Thai people held by Korean have been changed greatly, and Korean society made a step forward to becoming a multicultural society which embraces the differences in culture and appearances between Koreans and foreign migrants.

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